

## Sea of Cortez is still well worth an expedition

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Chugging across the glassy blue Sea of Cortez, several questions come to mind when you realize "a couple of dolphins" on the distant horizon are actually a *bochinche*, an organized, roiling feeding frenzy with untold hundreds of the playful mammals with the evil grin.

First, who came up with the Spanish word for a "dolphin feeding orgy"? And, more importantly: Are we gonna need a bigger boat?

Nearly seventy years after novelist John Steinbeck and marine biologist Ed Ricketts published their book about a wild and compelling expedition on the Western Flyer into this 700-mile slice up Mexico's left flank, the best way to experience the gulf and its Galapagos-like islands still is the way they did it: in a small ship.

It's clear from the book "Log from the Sea of Cortez" that this remote region only really reveals its secrets to travelers willing to make close contact, which explains how I came to be on a 70-passenger Lindblad Expeditions ship, the National Geographic Sea Bird, exploring stunning and forbidding land and sea - including some that hasn't changed since Ricketts and Steinbeck sailed through.

### Shaped by the San Andreas

Created by a few million years of lazy tectonic slip along the San Andreas Fault (it's only a matter of time before Cabo ends up next to Bakersfield), the Sea of Cortez is widely considered the youngest sea on the planet. Equally important in its history and ecology: There is no water, at least no reliable, regular source - springs are rare and, in some parts, rain occurs less frequently than Easter.



*Spud Hilton / The Chronicle*  
*Kayakers reach the beach in Ensenada Grande on Espiritu Santo Island in the Sea of Cortez.*

So while the gulf itself is a soup of sea life, the peninsula, as well as the 200 or so gulf islands, are largely undeveloped outside of Cabo, La Paz and Loreto - a fact that in modern times made them much easier to declare as protected lands.

It has had other names, including the Vermillion Sea (a dramatic moniker that proved to be fitting during our voyage), and the modern Gulf of California - which sounds too much like what's left of the West Coast after The Big One, so I sided with Steinbeck and Ricketts on the Sea of Cortez.

In 1940, the pair chartered a sardine boat out of Monterey for a 4,000-mile voyage to collect thousands of marine invertebrates from the teeming wealth of tide pools. Instead of being a clinical guide to six weeks of collecting species, the book they co-authored offers a vivid story of their interaction with locals and, at times, lengthy passages of philosophical pondering on everything from human nature to the mystical

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properties of the city of La Paz.

In the book, they described their trip and expedition: "We had no urge toward adventure. ... None of us was possessed of the curious boredom within ourselves which makes adventurers of bridge players."

While not a bridge player myself, I was fairly certain that seeing some of what they had seen would be, well, an adventure.



### Marine monsters

While the easy way to snorkel would have been to wade in from the beach at Los Islotes, there were a couple of minor problems:

-- There is no beach;

-- The only land resembling a beach was a rocky terrace covered with 800-pound monsters: bloated, leathery bull sea lions doing their best impression of howler monkeys with a smoker's cough and a beer-swiller's belch.

Adventures are rarely about the easy way.



We picked out wetsuits and snorkel gear, loaded into Zodiac boats and threw ourselves into the choppy

waters around the tiny rock islands that hundreds of California sea lions - and, I'm guessing from the guano, about 8 trillion birds - call home.

The payoff was sharing the sea with the younger animals, whose freakish agility and puppy-like curiosity (and faces) made it impossible not to smile - a problem for those with a mouthful of snorkel.

Resting in the bobbing Zodiac, I remembered that Ricketts and Steinbeck had devoted several pages of the book to sea monsters and humanity's need to believe in them. It was as close as I'd come to mythical beasts in the wild.

A naturalist explained some of the dynamics of sea lion bulls and the struggle to maintain both weight and a harem - no time to eat when there's females to keep. I imagined the barking was almost certainly obscenities meant to fend off potential intruders with the sea lion version of "Just keep walkin', man."

After a while, we did.

### Paddling the bays

At just 152 feet, the Sea Bird is nimble enough to maneuver into coves and bays and up to rock faces. Its height - a least three decks above the water line - offers views you can't get from the day excursion boats out of La Paz.

On the second day, we pulled into Half Moon Bay on Isla San Francisco (yes, really), a tan crescent fringing shallow, turquoise water made for kayaking. We had kayaked the day before on Ensenada Grande on Espiritu Santo Island, but wind had cut into seriously carefree paddling. At Isla San Francisco, there was enough breeze to provide relief but not affect your course.

From the beach, you see the desert life the naturalists were talking about, but in a kayak, the contrast between vibrant sea and harsh landscape becomes severe. After paddling aimlessly around the bay for a while, I beached the kayak, stripped off my shirt and waded on and off pretty much until our ingenious dinner on the beach. With the boat bobbing on the horizon, we noshed happily on seared tuna, sushi, ribs and grilled pizza with basil tomatoes and Brie. Camping fare this was not, which didn't stop the evening from having a summer camp vibe.

Like on the Western Flyer, most evenings on the Sea Bird served several roles, chief among them eating - more of a casual pleasure on this ship than the Olympic event it can be on large cruise ships.

After dinner came a gradual winding down, generally



with a recounting of the day's experiences - rubbing noses with a sea lion, a peaceful swim in a turquoise bay, an iPhone video of dolphins bow-riding - and, for some, star-gazing, cocktails and the subsequent philosophizing that often follows.



No nightclub, no dance floor, no karaoke, although Patricia The Bartender provided the fuel for spirited talks among the few of us awake past 10 p.m. After the last one surrendered, as the authors put it, "a quiet came over the boat and the trip slept."

### **In search of scorpions**

It's entirely possible that William Lopez-Forment gets a little too excited about finding scorpions. And, maybe, rattlesnakes.

Lopez-Forment, one of several naturalists on board with a wall full of advanced degrees, held the tiny cream-colored scorpion by the tail and launched into another of his spirited mini-lectures on life on the gulf islands. He obviously loves to bust myths.

"You fly over the desert and say, 'There's nothing alive.' Ha!" he had told us early in the trip. "This is richer than a tropical rain forest."

I had joined the short hike on Isla Santa Catalina, an island remarkable for its pin-cushion like concentration of cardon cacti, a hearty towering cousin of the saguaro but with more arms, and the only species of rattlesnake in the world that, well, doesn't have a rattle.

Walking up the valley from our rocky landing zone, we stopped every 10 yards to examine a plant or geologic feature, Lopez-Forment explaining its significance to the ecosystem and to early Mexican Indians, and every 5 yards or so he would lift a rock or check under bushes for scorpions and rattlesnakes. By the end of the short trip, we sighted nine varieties of cacti, 22 other plants from jojoba to wild cucumber, and a range of birds from a butterfly-size hummingbird to ravens that would have made Poe flinch. No rattleless rattlesnakes, but he seemed to take great joy in finding

the tiny scorpion. Maybe too much.

From a distance, Isla Santa Catalina had appeared to be another dusty, severe rock. I was beginning to understand what Steinbeck and Ricketts had written about the difference between studying in the lab and going out to where the life is.

That afternoon, the plan was to seek out a larger variety of sea life while sailing through the Bahia de Loreto National Park, a protected region of the Sea of Cortez off the coast near Loreto known as a popular passage among all sorts of sea monsters.

On the Western Flyer, Ricketts and Steinbeck were equipped with an 8mm movie camera, a German reflex still camera, a tripod and light meters. "The camera equipment was more than adequate," they wrote, "for it was never used." No one knew how to use it.

The passengers on the Sea Bird, however, seemed hell-bent on making up for Steinbeck's lack of images. Word of a sighting - dolphins, devil rays, a Bryde's whale - made portions of the ship look like a photography version of a Spanish galleon, with dozens of cannons (or Canons) primed to fire.

We hadn't been terribly successful at spotting the larger whales (and heard several times that "whale watching" should really be called "whale waiting"), when a



couple of the naturalists on the bow spotted what they thought to be "a couple of dolphins." As the captain closed the distance, passengers gasped. We had seen dolphins, a few at a time, during the voyage, but this was hundreds, dozens at a time leaping out of the water.

The practice, apparently, is to disorient and herd masses of fish using sound waves and the percussion of the dolphin's splashes. It was certainly disorienting the passengers, some of whom couldn't decide where in a field of leaping dolphins to point the camera. As a sign that dolphins always favor a good time over a good meal, packs broke off the frenzy to ride in the bow wake. No one seemed to be thinking about whales.

As it turns out, *bochinche* actually translates to "uproar" or "big noise," but it still seemed pretty apt for the scene. Oddly enough, Steinbeck's word for the scene might have translated to "buffet." On his scientific marine expedition, according to the book, the crew took a casual approach to cooking and consuming dolphins for dinner.

### **Expedition or adventure?**

On the last day at sea, I went back to reading "Sea of Cortez" after having watched a dolphin food riot, devil rays and two rare red tides (finally living up to the Vermillion Sea name), and I had two revelations:

-- There's no way I'm going to finish reading the book onboard;

-- Even Ricketts and Steinbeck, one of the nation's greatest novelists, didn't have the words to explain the gulf's mystical draw.

"Trying to remember the gulf is like trying to re-create a dream. This is by no means a sentimental thing, it has little to do with beauty or even conscious liking," the two men wrote.

"If it were lush and rich, one could understand the pull,



but it is fierce and hostile and sullen. ... But we know we must go back if we live, and we don't know why."

We had different goals: The authors were after an expedition that turned into an adventure; we were after an adventure that turned into a collecting expedition of a different type.

We had collected experiences, memories and enabling insight into why the gulf is even more important than we could have imagined before the trip. The closer we got, the easier it was to collect.

Sitting up on the sun deck as the last light turned the eastern sky to a bruise, I flipped ahead and found a passage that made me consider for a moment whether the pair had been on our boat.

"One thing had impressed us deeply on this little voyage: the great world dropped away very quickly," they wrote. "The matters of great importance we had left were not important. There must be an infective quality in these things. We had lost the virus, or it had been eaten by the anti-bodies of quiet. Our pace had slowed greatly; the hundred thousand small reactions of our daily world were reduced to very few."

Was it the place? Was it the boat? I no longer cared, and I put the book down.

